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ABSTRACT

The bare fact is that the speaker's words are nothing until the listener gives them meaning. The denotation of a word is developed through association with other words. The connotation is the more difficult concept to establish for the critical/comprehensive listener studying word meaning. The common explanation is that "connotation refers to the feelings or evaluation associated with a word." What "feeling" and "evaluation" mean, however, escapes the student. One excellent way of developing the concept "word connotation" is through a biofeedback experience with an instrument called the Galvanic-Skin Response Meter or an "Electrodermography (EDG)/Skin Conductance Instrument." An unsophisticated model may be purchased for $350. This experiential method of teaching should begin with the teacher's informing the students that connotation is developed through real and vicarious experiences of the word's referent and the referent's association with the senses and imagination of the communicator; people actually form physiological responses to concepts created in their minds through their senses or through words. In the exercise, one student is hooked up to the machine in such a way that he or she cannot see the indicator that the rest of the class will be watching. The instructor then mentions a series of words, some of which, like "rat," "bat," or "cockroach," elicit more of a response than others. The instructor explains that the indicator does not distinguish between positive and negative responses; rather it merely indicates which words carry the strongest connotations, good or bad. This exercise demonstrates that a mental concept creates a physiological response. The critical/comprehensive listener needs to be aware of how word meanings are developed in our minds and how we respond to these concepts. (TB)

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The Bare Facts about the Listener's Responsibility in Understanding Semantic Meaning

By Bob Bohlken

The bare fact is that the speaker's words are nothing until the listener gives them meaning. This fact maybe illustrated by a conversation about balls and strikes among three baseball umpires: The first umpire said "I call them the way I see them." The second umpire said "I call them the way they are." And the third umpire stated "until I call them they are nothing." So it is with language and the listener - a word is nothing until it is given meaning by the listener. Language is the creation of the mind world and only a representation of the real world. The mind world meaning has two dimensions - referred to as denotation and connotation. The critical/comprehensive listener must be capable of both dimensions of meaning to understand the message.

Our "mind-world's" verbal concepts are based on, according to I. A. Richards,[1] three elements: word, thought and referent - the real world experience. There is a relationship between word and thought and between thought and referent but not between word and referent. This relationship is created in the mind through association of experience and other words.

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The denotation of a word is developed through association with other words. Usually we develop a verbal concept by first putting it into a category - "an apple is a fruit" "democracy is a form of government" (even "sin" must have a category...but I don't know). Next in the mind world, we describe the concept primarily in regard to strength, quality and dynamics. Next we compare and contrast the concepts with other members of the category and finally we discuss where it is found and for what it is used. The critical comprehensive listener mental processing needs these elements to develop a verbal concept and should question the speaker for all of the development aspects.

The connotation is the more difficult concept to establish for the critical/comprehensive listener studying word meaning. The common explanation is that "connotation refers to the feelings or evaluation associated with the word." What "feeling" and "evaluation" really mean escapes the students. The examples of highly connotative words such as "liar", "hypocrite", and "liberal" follow the development but these too add little insight into the concept. This teaching method of developing "connotation" needs help and tangible illustration for the critical/comprehensive listener. I demonstrate how the connotation affects us by the word "peaches" and how I respond physiologically to the concept.

Another excellent way of developing the concept "word connotation" is through a biofeedback experience with an instrument called the Galvanic-Skin Response Meter or an

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"Electrodermograph (EDG)/Skin Conductance Instrument." An unsophisticated model of this instrument may be purchased for about $350.00 dollars.* I begin this experiential method of teaching the concept of "connotation" by informing the students that a word's connotation is developed through real and vicarious experiences of the word's referent and the referent's association with the senses and imagination of the communicator. I inform the students that we have a physiological response to concepts created in our minds through our senses or through words. I explain how our mental conceptionalization affects our heart rate, our breathing, our eye pupils and even the skin on our fingers. I request from the class a volunteer listener who is willing to have his/her responses measured on the meter. The words I say will be observed by the rest of the class. The volunteer is "hooked-up" to the instrument and placed so that he/she cannot observe the meter face. I inform the class that the responses do not indicate whether connotation, (the attitude or feeling toward that which the word represents is positive or negative. The meter merely demonstrates the reaction and degree of connotative value.

I usually begin with a series of words that have tangible referents--animals or insects that represent common experiences. The series of animals may include "horse" "elephant" "rabbit" "rat" "bat" and "mouse". The series of insects may include "but" "beetle" "cockroach" "spider" and "gnat". I will stop here and ask the class which word got the most response. Most times the greatest response comes from "rat", "bat", "cockroach", or "spider". I then ask the volunteer-subject if his/her experiences

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of the referents warranted the responses noted. We further discuss the experience or non-experience of the referents being represented by the word.

I now go to a series of word representing common beverages--"tea", "coffee", "Pepsi", "beer", "wine", "water", "lemonade", and foods--"pizza", "lobster", "Spam", "chicken livers", and "kinip". I remind the students that the responses do not indicate either a negative or positive value. The word "kinip" which represents an uncommon or inexperienced concept usually does not get a reaction until I tell them that "kinip" represents the ground meat taken from the snout and head of the hog.

I now present a series of words that represent abstract referents--"Catholic", "conservative", "democrat", "Lutheran", "Jewish", and "artist". Although these words represent general, broad, and abstract referents, they have high connotative values. I follow up with personal referents which represent the stereotyped abstractions--"Pope John", "William Buckley", "bill Clinton", and "Garth Brooks". We discuss the responses elicited by words presented and compare their connotative meanings and values.

Next, we go to a series of content and function words. Content words can be conceptionalized. They include nouns, active verbs, and some adverbs and adjectives--"smile", "dance", "sex", and "cool". Function words have no referents and merely serve a syntactical purpose in our language. Function words are prepositions, articles, linking verbs, and conjunctions--"on", "the", "for", "is", "who", and "at". We discuss the responses and

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observe that since the function words have no referents to experience, they have little or no connotative value; whereas, content words elicit responses.

I also demonstrate how "sense words" enhance the connotative value of a linguistic unit. I present the word "cave", and note the response. Then I say "dark, damp, dank and slimy cave" and we note the difference in the responses. I say "blanket" and note the response. Then I say "warm, soft, fuzzy, and snugly blanket" and note the response.

At this point I usually ask for a different volunteer. We begin by demonstrating the connotative values of euphemisms. I say "die", and then "pass away", "darn", and then "damn", "dung", and then "shit".

I demonstrate the effect that associating the concept personally has on the connotative value of the linguistic unit. I say "beautiful" and note response, then I say "you are beautiful". I say "fart" and then say "did you fart"? I say "stupid" and then say "you are stupid". Even though the volunteer-subject knows I am not serious, he/she still responds to the word association.

I usually conclude the experience by having the volunteer put his/her free hand behind his/her back extending one to five fingers. The number of extended fingers in unknown to us and the volunteer is told to think about the number, but when asked "Is the number ___?" he/she is to say "no" even if the correct number is asked. By watching the responses indicated on the meter we determine the number of fingers extended. If the subject does not think or conceptionalize the number, the meter will not register a

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response. This exercise demonstrates that a mental concept creates a physiological response. In language the connotative value of a word and its experienced referent determines the degree of the response.

The use of the Galvanic Skin Response Meter is an excellent method for explaining the elusive concept of "connotation" and "connotative value".

The critical/comprehensive listener needs to be aware of how word meanings are developed in our minds and how we respond to these concepts. The language is the essence of critical/comprehensive listening and should definitely be addressed in a listening class.

* Skin Response Meter Model 58018, Lafayette instrument, P.O. Box 5720, Lafayette, Indiana 47903-5720.

[1] Ogden, C. K. & I. A. Richards. The Meaning of Meaning 1923 HBJ Book, New York.

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